

# The California Endowment's Youth Power Infrastructure: An Overview of Youth-Serving Organizations and Intermediaries It Supports

December 2019

---

## Veronica Terriquez

University of California, Santa Cruz

Over the last decade, The California Endowment (TCE) has nurtured organizations that engage low-income youth of color in holding institutions accountable for the health and well-being of their communities. TCE has accomplished this by supporting a Youth Power Infrastructure composed of youth-serving organizations—nonprofit 501(c)3 organizations that work directly with youth leaders—and intermediaries that both complement and support them. Consonant with TCE's goals, funded organizations aim to empower those most affected by health disparities to help shape policies, systems, and public narratives in ways that advance health equity and racial justice.

TCE conceptualizes power as “the ability to win, implement, and sustain long-term change that can further democratic inclusion and reduce inequality.” The Youth Power Infrastructure develops the ability of youth to respond to health-related challenges affecting their communities.

This report describes the TCE-supported Youth Power Infrastructure and indicators of impact. Based on the age composition of TCE-supported programs, youth here are generally defined as adolescents and young adults, usually under the age of 30. This report begins with a conceptual description of what youth power looks like at the individual, community, and regional/ statewide levels. Next, it turns to the organizations that directly serve youth, as well as the intermediaries that provide technical expertise and deepen networks among those trying to address health and racial disparities across the state. Finally, the report provides a brief



Photo Credit: Youth Together

accounting of fairly recent milestones and victories TCE-funded organizations have achieved in advancing health and well-being. The conclusion summarizes findings and offers suggestions for further strengthening this infrastructure.

This report is informed by interviews with TCE staff conducted in early 2019.<sup>1</sup> It also draws on 2018-2019

---

<sup>1</sup> A total of 21 interviews and one focus group with staff were jointly conducted by researchers at UCSC and at I-SEED (Institute for Sustainable Economic, Educational and Environmental Design). Interviews were used to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how TCE's investments advance youth power.

self-reported data from the staff of 204 grant-receiving nonprofit organizations that TCE staff identified as belonging to the Youth Power Infrastructure. Data from grant recipients were collected through web surveys, and a 100% response rate was achieved.

### **Building Youth Power at the Individual, Community, Regional, and Statewide Levels**

Today's low-income youth of color face many challenges to their health and well-being. Systemic racism, economic inequality, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia have contributed to disproportionately high rates of trauma, criminalization, violence, asthma, housing displacement, poor academic outcomes, and other health-related inequalities among youth of color. These health-related challenges manifest at the individual, community, regional, and state levels. TCE has adopted a strategy of empowering the most-affected individuals to better attend to their own individual health and well-being, while also advocating for broader structural change. Given the limited ways that schools, religious institutions, and workplaces have engaged young people in social change efforts, non-profit 501(c)3 organizations have functioned as the primary vehicle for building power in recent decades. The following outlines how the TCE-supported nonprofit civic infrastructure is currently and can continue to build power among individual youth, their communities, and beyond.

**Individual-Level Youth Power.** With varying levels of success, TCE-supported youth organizations have helped low-income youth confront challenges related to poverty, racism, and other systemic inequalities by offering programming that comprehensively builds up their leadership skills. To date, many youth serving-organizations have provided their young memberships with meaningful opportunities to develop basic civic skills such as the ability to speak in public, develop agendas, run meetings, and plan events. Youth power has been bolstered when organizations have offered a critical civics education, which teaches members how to analyze the root causes of community problems; research policy solutions; develop and implement strategic grassroots organizing, advocacy, and civic engagement campaigns; and/or use multiple forms of art and media to share their perspectives. In some organizations, this education has fostered young people's sense of pride in their multiple identities and enhanced their understanding of diversity within their own communities. Organizations with comprehensive programming have also helped their members attend to their own self-care, healing, and educational and career goals.<sup>2</sup>

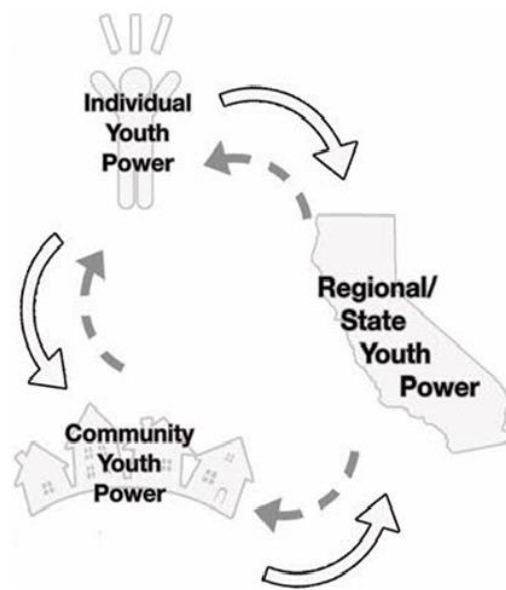
**Community-Level Youth Power.** TCE investments in the Youth Power Infrastructure have, to varying degrees, helped combat some of the ways in which local communities undermine the health and well-being of low-income youth. Community-level youth power exists when there is an informed base of individual youth ready to take action and trained to engage their peers and adults in organizing, advocacy, and/or media outreach. As evidenced by documented campaign efforts and increased voter turnout, TCE-supported youth organizations across the state have

---

<sup>2</sup> Terriquez, Veronica. 2017. "Building Healthy Communities Through Youth Leadership: The Comprehensive Outcomes of Youth Organizing." Los Angeles: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: [http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/BHC\\_YouthOrganizing\\_2pgr\\_August2017.pdf](http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/BHC_YouthOrganizing_2pgr_August2017.pdf).

become increasingly prepared to lead local grassroots campaigns, create systems change, educate voters, and shape local narratives.

**Figure 1. The Multiple Levels of Youth Power**



**Regional/Statewide-Level Youth Power.** Youth power can also help tackle regional and statewide health disparities. To this end, TCE has supported coalitions, camps, regional trainings, and statewide gatherings and trainings. For example, the Sisterhood Rising and Sons and Brothers Camps have provided young leaders across the state with opportunities to strengthen their networks, further enhance their leadership skills, and encourage their own healing.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, statewide or regional gatherings hosted by TCE-funded groups—including (but not limited to) YO! Cali, Power California, PolicyLink, and the Center at the Sierra Health Foundation—have helped youth to develop regional and statewide strategies, all while strengthening participants’ identities as movement leaders. Additionally, the President’s Youth Council has also advanced a statewide agenda. Accordingly, TCE’s investments at these broader levels have created platforms for young leaders to work with others outside their immediate communities to achieve policy changes, increase voter turnout, and enhance public understandings of health and related social issues. As they become interconnected across

<sup>3</sup> Pastor, Manuel, Veronica Terriquez, and May Lin. 2018. “How Community Organizing Promotes Health Equity and How Health Equity Impacts Organizing.” *Health Affairs* 37(3): 358-363.

<sup>4</sup> Serrano, Uriel and David Turner. 2019. *The 2019 Sons and Brothers Camp: Healing and Youth Empowerment*. ISEED. Oakland, CA.

Betania, Santos. 2019. *Sisterhood Rising: Themes and Recommendations*. UC Santa Cruz Youth Organizing Research Team. Santa Cruz, CA.

communities and regions, youth leaders can further coordinate their efforts and amplify their voice.<sup>5</sup>

### The Youth Power Infrastructure

TCE has invested in youth organizations and intermediaries that contribute to the Youth Power Infrastructure across the state. In listing grantees that are part of this infrastructure in 2018 and 2019, TCE staff identified 154 youth-serving groups, 33 intermediaries, and 17 organizations that identified as both intermediaries and as youth-serving organizations.

**Figure 2. TCE-Supported Youth Power Infrastructure**

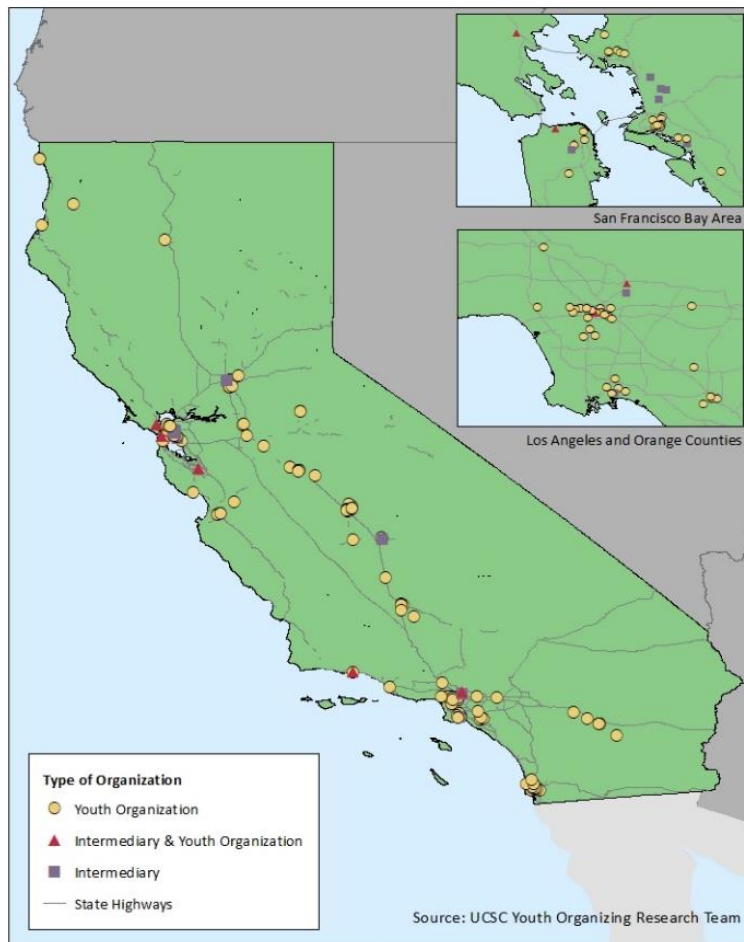


Figure 2 illustrates the geographic distribution of TCE grantees that aim to help build youth power.



Photo Credit: 99Rootz

<sup>5</sup> For example, at the height of the DREAM movement in 2010-2012, undocumented youth organizations across the state developed strong connections across the state as a result of the California Dream Network and the DREAM Team Alliance. These statewide networks, which met regionally and statewide, facilitated the passage of the California DREAM Act. (See Terriquez, Veronica. 2017. "Legal Status, Civic Organizations, and Political Participation among Latino Young Adults." *The Sociological Quarterly* 58(2):315-336.)

Groups directly serving youth build individual and community power to varying degrees. Depending on their level of connectivity to other youth-serving organizations and their geographic scale, these organizations also have the potential to build youth power at the regional and statewide levels.

**Figure 3. Primary Geographic Focus**

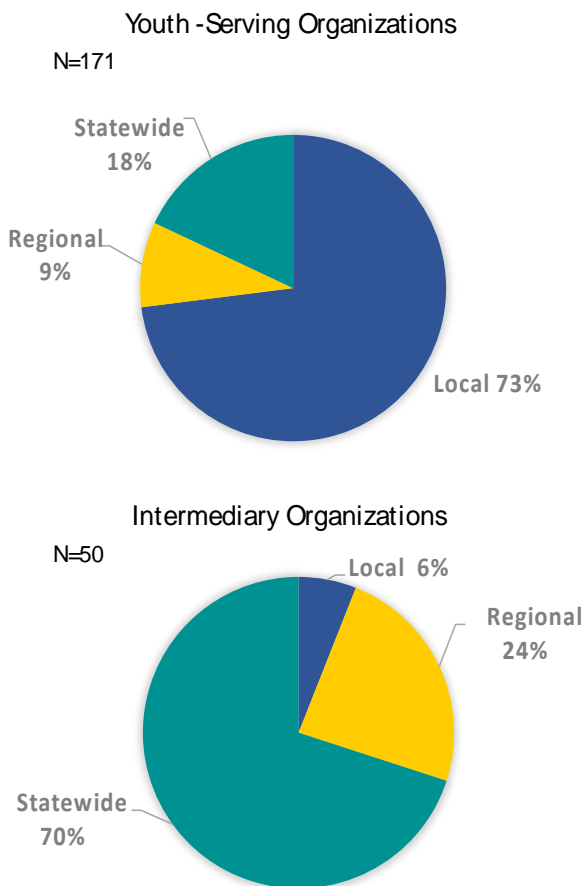


Figure 3 shows the primary spatial scales targeted by the 171 youth-serving groups (including intermediaries with young memberships). Most youth-serving groups (73%) operate at a local level in one or more communities within one county. The remaining groups may contribute to youth power at larger geographic scales, with 9% working at a regional level across neighboring counties and 18% operating at a state-wide level. Indeed, most of these organizational efforts remain at the local level, as only 50% of organizations reported sending their youth members to participate in TCE-funded regional or statewide events.

In contrast, the 50 groups described as intermediaries (including those with youth members) primarily support youth power at larger geographic scales. While only 6% operate in one or more communities within a county, 24% work at the regional level across more than one county. Meanwhile, 70% engage in work at the state-wide level.

To varying degrees, TCE-funded youth-serving groups and intermediaries work collaboratively to build power at the multiple levels. In fact, two thirds (66%) of organizations reported working with other organizations that had received TCE grants. Further collaboration among funded groups can potentially strengthen efforts to advance health and well-being locally and at larger spatial scales.

### How Youth-Serving Organizations Help Build Power

Youth-serving organizations can play a critical role in supporting youth leadership development, and thus the ability of young people to exercise power. As shown in Figure 4, the overwhelming

Figure 4: Age Composition of Organizations' Youth Membership

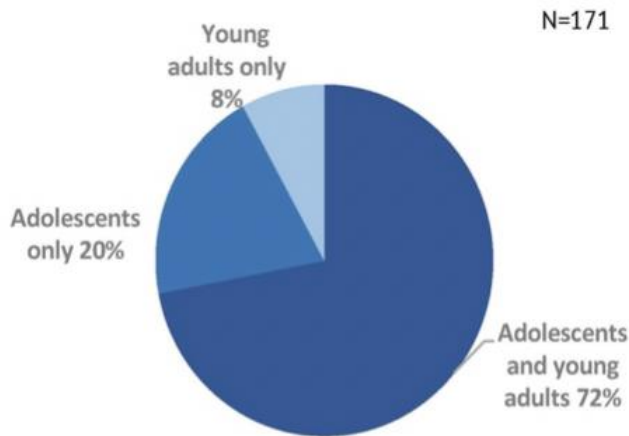
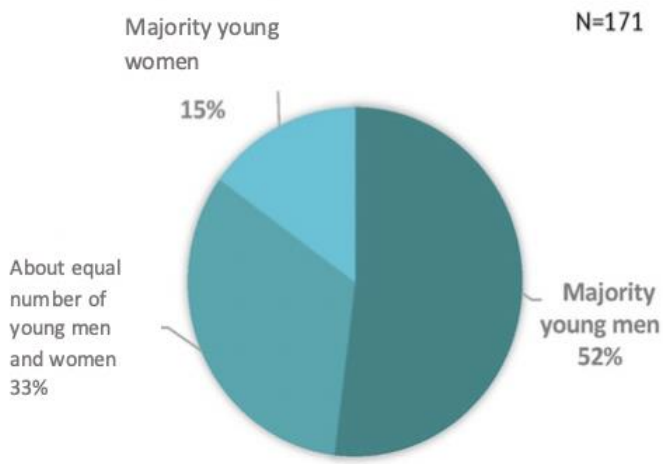


Figure 5: Gender Composition of Organizations' Youth Membership

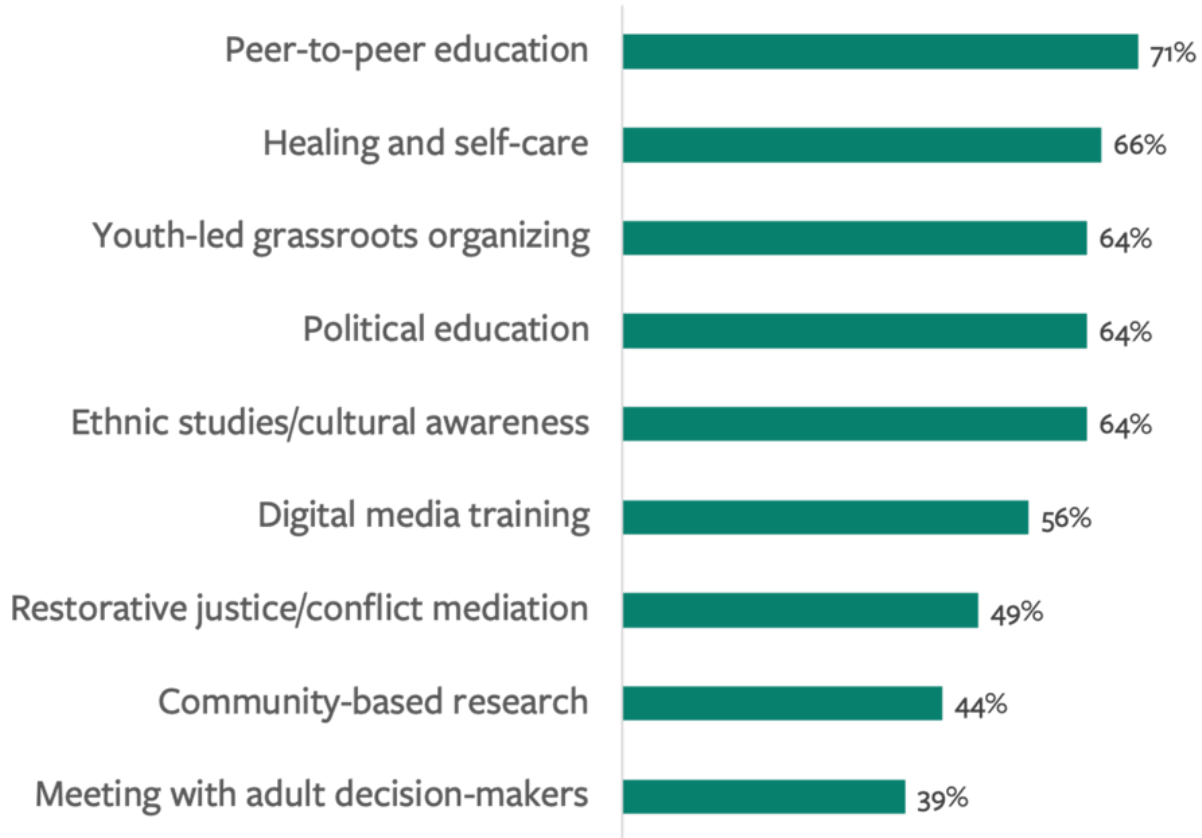


conforming youth who make up a significant proportion of leaders in some organizations.

majority (72%) of youth-serving groups supported by TCE engage both high school-aged adolescents and young adults. However, 20% of these groups engage only adolescents, and 8% engage only young adults. TCE has invested heavily in the leadership development of low-income boys and men of color, in part because they are significantly overrepresented in the prison system and significantly underrepresented in institutions of higher education. These disparities are related to the comparatively lower life expectancy and poor health outcomes for men of color. Thus, just over half of youth-serving organizations report engaging majority male youth in their programming, as illustrated in Figure 5. Yet it is worth noting that in a 2016 survey of youth leaders affiliated with TCE's Building Healthy Communities program, women outnumbered men among the core leadership.<sup>6</sup> Core leaders are defined as the youth who participate regularly in programming. Unfortunately, existing data do not demonstrate the extent to which the gender make-up of the core leadership reflects that of the broader population of youth participating in these organizations' programs. Data also fail to account for the representation of gender non-

<sup>6</sup> Terriquez, Veronica. 2016. *Youth Civic Engagement and Community Well-Being in California: Summary of Key findings from the 2016 Youth Leadership and Healthy Survey*. Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: [http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/BHC\\_Youth\\_Survey\\_2016\\_Statewide\\_Summary.pdf](http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/BHC_Youth_Survey_2016_Statewide_Summary.pdf)

**Figure 6. Cultivating Youth Power**  
**Percent of Organizations offering Key Activities**  
**at least once a month (N=171)**



Notably, TCE-funded groups vary significantly in the frequency with which they engage their core leaders in programming, which has implications for youth leadership development. For example, 54% of organizations meet with their core leaders at least weekly, while 16% meet with their core leadership monthly or less frequently. Regular gatherings with leaders, including in-person and virtual meetings, play a role in supporting youths’ informed and authentic voice in collective efforts to affect change.

Yet, overall, TCE-supported youth organizations are involving their core leaders in activities that can help youth build power. For example, as shown in Figure 6, 71% of organizations conduct peer-to-peer education on a monthly basis, affording experienced young leaders a way to build collective power through engaging their peers on shared issues or concerns. Fifty-six percent offer digital media training for their members, providing tools to reach broader audiences and promote narrative change. Just under half (49%) involve their members in restorative justice training and/or conflict resolution, giving them skills that might enhance interpersonal understanding, build community, and prevent violence. Another 44% of groups ask core leaders to participate in community-based research that might inform or guide campaign and advocacy efforts. Aside from supporting leaders in activities that could engage broader

constituencies, some groups also attend to their members’ developmental needs. For example, two thirds of groups offer healing or self-care activities to strengthen mental health and well-being, thus potentially enhancing youths’ capacity to advocate for change. Finally, to support power building among their members, two thirds of organizations (67%) reported engaging young people in decision-making within their programs, campaigns, or other aspects of their work.

Taken together, these survey findings suggest that TCE-funded youth-serving organizations are providing their members with the civic knowledge, skills, and experience that lead to individual empowerment. This empowerment, in turn, allows them to collectively exercise power within their communities or at broader geographic scales.

### How Intermediaries Help Build Power

To advance the development of youth power, TCE also funded intermediaries, organizations that often connect with youth-serving organizations to support programming and provide a range of technical assistance. Depending on their focus, they play a role in helping youth-serving groups scale up campaigns, create systems change, and/or produce new narratives that reflect the interests of low-income youth of color.

**Figure 7. Intermediaries’ Areas of Expertise** (N=50)

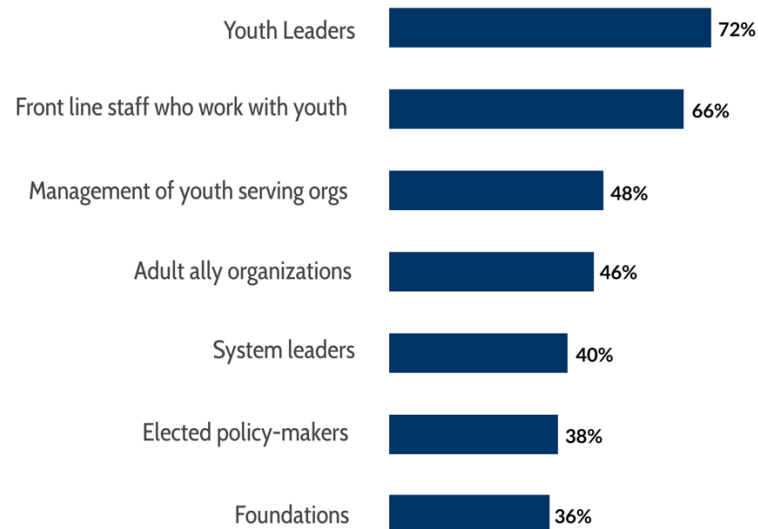


Figure 7 lists the self-reported expertise areas of the 50 intermediaries TCE supports as part of the youth power infrastructure. The most commonly reported area of expertise was youth leadership development (62%). The majority also reported policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, and communications (or youth media) experience. A significant percentage also



indicated expertise in arts or cultural activism (40%), civic engagement and voter mobilization (40%), policy analysis (38%), wellness and healing practices (38%), and addressing the needs of system-impacted youth (32%). Smaller percentages reported expertise in community action research (26%), workforce development (16%), and fiscal sponsorship (10%).

**Figure 8. Clients Served by Intermediaries** (N=50)



Intermediaries serve a range of clients, as illustrated in Figure 8. Most work directly with youth leaders (72%) and with the frontline staff of youth organizations (66%). As such, some of these intermediaries may have direct or indirect effects in empowering individual youth leaders. Meanwhile, 48% of intermediaries work with the management of youth-serving organizations, while 46% work with adult ally organizations. Another 40% listed system leaders as their clients, and 38% listed elected policymakers. Just over a third, 36%, included philanthropic organizations among their clients.

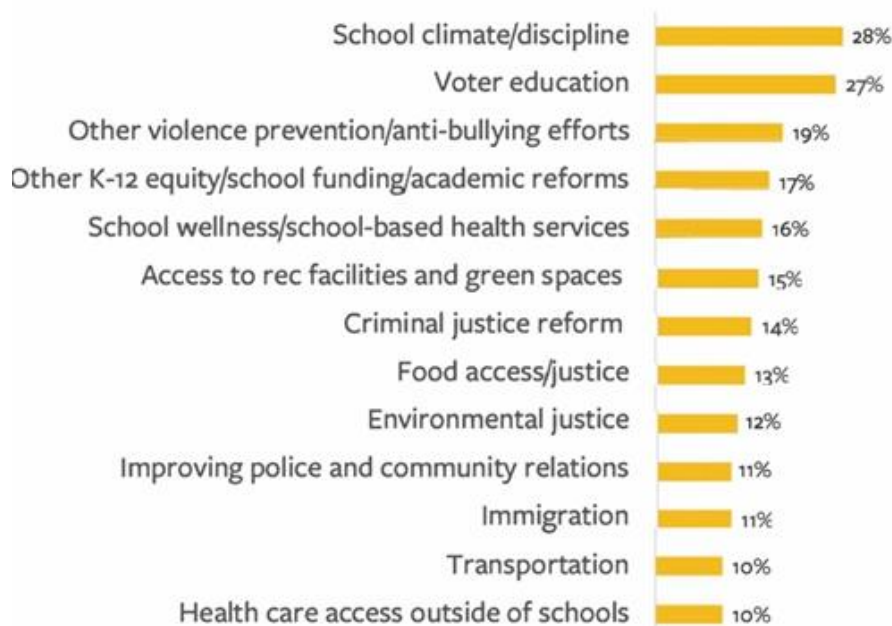
### Advancing Health and Well-Being Across California

While TCE-supported youth organizations and intermediaries might take different approaches to cultivating youth power, they have collectively reported achievements in changing policies and elevating youth power across California. The survey data collected for this report provide an overview of the issue areas addressed by the Youth Power Infrastructure.



Photo Credit: Community Coalition

**Figure 9. Youth-Led Campaign Milestones, 2016-2018** (N=204)



Specifically, staff from youth-serving groups and intermediaries were asked to reflect on the previous two years and report the important milestones and victories they had achieved, shown in Figure 9. The findings illustrated here rely on individual reports and do not account for shared victories and milestones achieved by the coalition groups working to achieve common campaign or systems change goals. The largest percentage of groups reported achievements related to school climate and school discipline (28%), followed by voter education (27%). Groups also reported gains made in violence prevention, safety, or other anti-bullying efforts (27%) and other K-12 reforms (17%). Sixteen percent of groups also claimed victories around school wellness or health services (16%), while 15% reported increased access to recreational facilities, green space, or parks. Gains were also reported in criminal justice reform, food justice, environmental justice, police-community relations, and immigration. Still smaller percentages of groups, not included in the figure, made gains around LGBTQ rights, reproductive justice, housing, local government investments in youth, and gun reform. Some of these victories and milestones around school climate and discipline have been verified and reported in greater depth elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> as has the impact on voter turnout.<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning that survey questions did not capture data on gains around cultural activism and narrative change.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see 2016 site-level reports on Building Healthy Communities-affiliated groups available at <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/bhc-youth-civic-eng-wellbeing/>.

<sup>8</sup> Terriquez, Veronica, Jiayi Xu, Randy Villegas, and Jennifer Soto. 2019. "Youth Power at the Ballot Box: How Youth-Led Voter Engagement Efforts Increased Turnout Among Young Voters in California's 2018 Midterm Election." Los Angeles: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/yvote/>.

## Strengthening the Youth Power Infrastructure

This report provides a conceptual framework for thinking about how TCE’s investments support multiple levels of youth power. Specifically, this report proposes ways in which power cultivated among individual youth leaders can contribute to collective power at the local community, regional, and statewide levels. Self-reported data from the staff of youth-serving organizations suggest that these groups are employing a variety of programming strategies to empower individual youth. Moreover, they are engaging their members in grassroots organizing, advocacy, and narrative change efforts, thereby contributing to the demonstration of youth power at the local level with the potential to expand to regional and statewide scales. Intermediaries also play a role in supporting youth power building. As part of the Youth Power Infrastructure, they bring a range of expertise to support youth-serving organizations and other clients, especially in advancing campaigns and shaping new narratives.

Campaign victories and milestones reveal the impact that these investments have had on improving health for youth and their communities. The extent to which these self-reported victories and milestones achieve actual policy, systems, or narrative change is beyond the scope of this report, although other work has shown that some efforts by individual organizations and coalitions have resulted in significant local and statewide victories.

Thanks to TCE’s investments, the statewide Youth Power Infrastructure has not only expanded over the last decade, but has also become more interconnected through intermediaries. Moving forward, TCE-funded youth-serving organizations have the opportunity to fine-tune their youth leadership development practices and scale up campaigns so that their work has greater effect at the regional and statewide levels. For example, some groups can meet more regularly with their youth members and also (resources permitting) seek out collaborations with other community partners. Additionally, opportunities to connect a greater number of youth-serving organizations to regional and statewide opportunities should be

Photo Credit: AYPAL



explored. Intermediaries can also be deployed in increasingly strategic ways to build power at multiple levels, further increasing interconnectivity among youth-serving organizations. Accordingly, TCE and grantees can learn from research on best practices in order to strengthen the Youth Power Infrastructure in ways that continue to center the needs of young people most affected by health disparities.



Photo Credit: RYSE

**THIS RESEARCH HAS BEEN FUNDED BY THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT**

**UC SANTA CRUZ** | Institute for **Social Transformation**

**USC**  
**Dornsife**  
*Program for  
Environmental and  
Regional Equity*